



Blue River Urban Waters Federal Partnership

2018-2019 Workplan

Executive Summary

Since 2013, the Blue River Urban Waters Partnership (BRUW) has been working to restore land, reconnect people and revitalize communities in the Blue River watershed in the Kansas City Metro, both in Kansas and Missouri. Co-led by the US Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), Heartland Conservation Alliance and Mid-America Regional Council the Partnership includes more than 30 federal, state, and local partners. Developed with input from Blue River Urban Waters partners, this work plan highlights key projects that advance Urban Waters goals in Kansas City, including those directly initiated by Urban Waters, as well as those driven by local partners with Urban Waters playing a supporting role. It also identifies tasks for moving existing and new initiatives forward in 2020. Highlights in the workplan include accomplishments in key strategies developed by the Steering Committee in 2017:

- Urban Restoration Areas
- Community Engagement
- Partnerships



Above at left, Blue Valley Community Advisory Council members visit Blue Valley Park guided by Larry O'Donnell, Healthy Rivers Partnership. Above center the Blue River Rescue partners host the 27th river clean up in April. Urban Waters hosts crews along the river at the Municipal Farm. Above right, Alex George Lake is being restored to wetland with support from Heartland Conservation Alliance, Jackson County Parks + Rec and Missouri Department Conservation.

Partnership

History

Heartland Conservation Alliance (HCA) continues to serve as the Urban Waters Blue River Ambassador (Ambassador) in partnership with the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC). HCA and MARC have successfully served as co-leads since 2012 and as the Ambassador since 2016. HCA and MARC have been instrumental in convening and building the structure of the Blue River Urban Waters Federal Partnership Steering Committee (Steering Committee), which meets monthly to work together to plan strategically and catalyze four key projects that are connected through the geography of the Blue River Watershed.



The Steering Committee has successfully accelerated and catalyzed work with on-the-ground projects prioritized as critical to improving water quality, restoring outdoor spaces, and fostering community

stewardship in urban watersheds. We have secured more than \$650,000 in non-federal funding to directly support our work; convened more than 20 Steering Council meetings; presented our work at more than a dozen public forums; created a Renew the Blue communication plan; conducted an analysis of invasive honeysuckle with USGS; actively supported and provided leadership to the Urban Waters Federal Partnership (UWFP) Executive Workgroup; served as a host site for DOI AmeriCorps VISTA for four years; launched a stewardship training program and completed small scale restoration demonstrations at one of our key sites; and we have actively participated and presented at many Urban Waters National Workshops. HCA will continue to serve as the Ambassador by assisting in planning and tracking local project progress toward completion; engaging stakeholders, convening meetings, and using information sharing tools to improve communication; further the national partnership's work; and networking regularly with other UWFP locations.

Accomplishments

We worked throughout the year to strengthen and build partnerships with federal partners that will lay a foundation for the continuity of the Urban Waters projects. A few highlights included:

- Increase support and engagement with Marais des Cygnes National Wildlife Reserve,
- USGS secured \$200,00 in cost share match to support water testing
- Co-led a national webinar about Parks with Purposed hosted by River Network.
- Collaborated with Great American Outdoors program leaders; assisted five families to participate in Fishing Derby
- Assisted and presented at Federal Inter-Agency Mitigation and Resiliency Workgroup (Federal Partners.) Members include FEMA, USACE, EPA, HUD, USGS, NRCS, BIA, USDA, & NOAA

- USGS finalized Honeysuckle Density Mapping Tools
- USFS Branching Out Grant supports Green Guard Stewardship Training more deeply engaging USFS staff on the ground in Kansas City
- UMKC students engaged through USGS in water testing at Municipal Farm
- Missouri Department of Natural Resources collaborates on restoration Project at Municipal Farm
- Land Trust Business Plan with The Conservation Fund and The Nature Conservancy for upper watershed conservation strategies
- HCA Policy Work Group developing Healthy Watershed Resolution
- Participated in a state-wide second annual Missouri Conservation Partners Roundtable 10/15/18 in Columbia, MO. and MoDNR Stakeholder Meetings in Jefferson City, MO.
- New partnerships: Exploring Roots is a local NOG focused on using outdoor experiences to address health issue for urban youth; Urban Trail Co. in grant with NRPA for funding to work with HCA and Blue Valley Neighborhood to design trails for community; Bike Walk KC – Ex. Director joins HCA Policy Work Group; collaborate with St. Louis Development Coalition Laura Ginn and MDC Tracy Boaz to discuss ways to collaborate vacant lot efforts,
- Ongoing support and participation in KCMO Blue River Quarterly, Brush Creek Coordinating Committee, KCMO Environmental Management Commission; KCMO 3rd District Community Meetings; KCMO 5th District Community Meetings: 6th District Community Meetings, KCEEN meetings; MARC facilitates meetings and participate in workgroups for V2V Green Space: HCA and MARC co-chair meetings and Kansas City Native Plant Initiative
- Provide leadership for Missouri Land Trust Coalition and Blue River Conservation Collaborative in Kansas;
- Created land trust business plan;



Urban Waters Steering Committee members share information and activities with Blue Valley residents.

BLUE RIVER URBAN WATERS PARTNERS

Corporation for National and Community–AmeriCorps VISTA**
 Bike Walk KC
 Blue River Watershed Association
 Blue Valley Neighborhood Association
 Boys Grow KC
 Bridging The Gap–Heartland Tree Alliance–Kansas City WildLands
 Center for Neighborhoods
 City Of Kansas City, Missouri
 –KC Water**
 –Planning Department**
 –Brownfields Department**
 –KC Parks and Recreation**
 –Housing and Neighborhood Department
 –KC Land Bank
 Deep Roots (formerly KC Native Plant Initiative)
 Giving Grove
 Green Works KC
 Health Forward Foundation
 Healthy Rivers Partnership
 Heartland Conservation Alliance**
 US Housing and Urban Development
 Jackson County Parks + Recreation
 Kansas City Public Schools
 K-State University
 Marlborough Community Coalition
 Mid-America Regional Planning Council**
 Missouri Department of Natural Resources
 Missouri Department of Conservation**
 National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
 National Parks and Recreation Association
 Shumaker Family Foundation
 The Conservation Fund
 The Nature Conservancy - Kansas**
 Urban Trail Co.
 Urban Neighborhood Initiative
 University of Missouri -Kansas City
 US Forest Service
 Wichita State University
 Urban Waters Learning Network

- Participates in national conferences including Children in Nature Network, Land Trust Alliance Rally, River Rally, One Water Summit;
- Advanced Healthy Watershed Resolution; and
- Expanded the Steering Committee partnership;

Next Steps

A key goal of the Ambassador will be ensuring continuity of planning and continuation of past efforts. In 2016 and 2017 the Steering committee created new tools and plans that will be further developed to catalyze action with partners. Specifically, the Blue River Action Plan (Plan) was developed to outline restoration and conservation opportunities in the watershed.

We will continue to develop and catalyze the Plan and other tools created by the Steering Committee.

Further development of the Plan will catalyze successful on-the-ground, short- and medium-term projects in the middle Blue River area. Catalyst actions will include:

- Approach key area landowners and land managers about adopting the Plan (2020);
- Catalyze key projects identified through partner and community engagement (2020); and
- Leverage the projects to build capacity for future years. We will facilitate adoption and refinement of the Plan through community engagement and workshops (2020).

The Ambassador will also research and explore the feasibility of forming a watershed district. This district would be funded by landowners in the watershed with future built development practically and financially supporting the protection of the Blue River (2020).

FUNDING

Local Urban Waters partners have secured grants totaling over \$2 million. Federal partners provided direct assistance in preparing proposals that secured over \$400,000. (These estimates are conservative and do not include the substantial in-kind and cash match leveraged by partners.) Funds benefited several communities throughout the Blue River Watershed. This increase in grant funding from previous years reflects years of Urban Waters effort to communicate opportunities and priorities, increase organizational capacities, and encourage higher quality grant applications. Examples include:

- USGS, USEPA, USFS secured agency funds to support local priority projects, such as water testing and Green Guard Stewardship training;
- New partners secured local private funding to support a documentary, future flooding models with K-State and a paid intern;
- Heartland Conservation Alliance collaborated with KC Parks and KC Water to secure funding from the National Parks and Recreation Association for community engagement and 60 acres of park restoration along the Blue River; and
- Both Mid-America Regional Council and Heartland Conservation alliance succeeded in partnering with the Health Forward Foundation to secure funding to support restoring vacant lots.

OUTREACH

Our Urban Waters team continues to share information about funding opportunities and help partners develop strong projects and successful proposals. Through mid-2020, HCA Director Jill Erickson served part-time as the Urban Waters Ambassador. In 2020, HCA hired Trevor Harris to be the full-time Middle Blue River Urban Waters Ambassador. The Ambassador's Mission is to accelerate and coordinate on-the-ground projects, promote community engagement, and advance water and land protection and restoration. The Ambassador convenes various working groups and addresses funding opportunities that require cross-organization collaboration. The Renew the Blue campaign continues to gain momentum with 15 partners sharing outcomes and co-branding efforts. In 2018, the partnership launched a new website: www.JoinRenewtheBlue.org. We estimate our total promotional reach for 2018 was 56,791 people; and estimated total attendance for 2018 Renew the Blue events was 3,762.

Accomplishments

- The Ambassador compiled and distributed monthly meeting notes and announcements (plus special alerts as needed).
- Steering Committee meetings were held monthly, and the Ambassador participated in monthly calls with 19 federal locations and partners.
- In 2018, Urban Waters began work to create a series of informational videos to increase awareness and understanding of the work.
- Filming began for Blue River Documentary Film in 2018.
- Partners made several public presentations about the work.
- The Ambassador assisted FEMA in hosting a community workshop at EPA Region 7 offices in December 2018.



Next Steps

- Urban Waters will continue to facilitate communication among partners through monthly e-blasts and regular partnership meetings (2020);
- Partners will continue working to increase engagement with new federal partners (2020); and
- The Partnership will continue to participate in Urban Waters national calls and assist with specific tasks as needed.

The Blue River Documentary aired on KCPT in December on 2019. Plans are underway to share the film more broadly with community events.

Urban Restoration Areas

PARKS WITH PURPOSE

Project Background

In 2011, the Marlborough Coalition of Neighborhoods became home to one of our country's largest, most comprehensive, neighborhood-based green infrastructure installations, the Middle Blue River Basin Green Solutions Pilot Project, which includes more than 100 bio-swales and rain gardens, porous concrete sidewalks, and native trees on parkways. The project was the first green infrastructure project to be completed as part of Kansas City's 25-year Overflow Control Program, which is designed to improve water quality by reducing the frequency and volume of sewer overflows and represents the largest infrastructure investment in Kansas City's history. The projects were designed and installed by the City of Kansas City Water Services to keep rain water from overwhelming sewers as part of a consent decree with EPA, but the Marlborough Coalition was fully engaged in the process of identifying and including in the projects solutions to their most important priorities which included reducing litter, calming traffic issues, restoring urban trees and fixing sidewalks.



With funding from The Conservation Fund, Perpetual Motion art focused event was held in the Marlborough community.

The Marlborough Community Coalition developed The Catalyst Plan in 2013 to discover and develop the rich assets of the five neighborhoods of the Marlborough community (Battleflood Heights, Walnut Grove, Marlborough East, Marlborough Renaissance, and Marlborough Pride), and craft an action plan to create a thriving place to grow up, live and work.

In 2014, Heartland Conservation Alliance and the Blue River Urban Waters Federal partnership partnered with the Marlborough Community Coalition and KC Water to develop a Parks with Purpose project with funding of \$250,000 from The Conservation Fund and UHaul at 81st Street and Troost Avenue. At this site, 38 vacant privately owned lots were chosen by Kansas City Water Services for Phase 2 of its green infrastructure improvements. The City purchased the lots with an initial project investment of \$175,000 and constructed a large vegetated detention basin to reduce combined sewer overflows and downstream flooding at a cost estimated to be more than \$10 million. Marlborough Community Coalition and KC Parks invested \$450,000 to design and construct a Nature + Play area to add value and community benefits to the site. The city commissioned an artist, Jacob Balcom to design and install public sculptures, called Blomes.

Accomplishments

- With funding from The Conservation Fund, one of 42 national NGO Urban Waters partners, four Nature Nodes were designed and installed by local contractor, Down To Earth Services

- The project has been managed by Urban Waters Ambassador, Heartland Conservation Alliance.
- The Marlborough Community Coalition held two neighborhood clean ups in June and September. An intern from the community was hired to assist.
- Heartland Conservation Alliance hosted a summer Green Guard Stewardship Training program with 11 graduating stewards in 2017 and 20 graduates in 2018.
- Midwest Geoinfo and the Missouri Department of Conservation initiated a tree inventory at Kansas City, Missouri's East High School forest.



Next Steps

- Organize and host Green Guard Stewardship program (2020);
- Sustain maintenance of project sites (ongoing);
- Increase use and programming on-site (ongoing); and
- Work with partner neighborhoods to implement workforce development plans (2020).

MUNICIPAL FARM

History

Located upstream of the former Anadarko Petroleum site, the 422-acre Municipal Farm has been in ownership of the City of Kansas City, Missouri since 1911. The site benefits from close proximity to major regional natural resources and amenities (like the Blue River, Brush Creek, Truman Sports Complex, regional greenway trails, and the Rock Island Corridor.) The farm has been home to the city's tuberculosis hospital, women's reformatory, municipal correctional institution and an inmate-run farm.



After the jail was demolished in 2009, City staff embarked on a planning initiative with an EPA Area Wide Brownfields Planning Grant (2010) to outline the community's vision for the farm's future. The resulting Municipal Farm Sustainable Reuse Plan (SRP) provides an integrated development strategy that embraces small-scale urban agriculture coupled with ecosystem restoration and outdoor recreation and education.



In conjunction with this effort, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) developed an ecosystem restoration plan for the western portion of the Municipal Farm, which was integrated with the SRP. The Kansas City, Missouri City Council formally adopted the SRP as the City's official plan for the site on December 20, 2012 in Resolution No. 120959. Partners working to implement

the community’s vision include Kansas City Community Gardens, Boys Grow, Heartland Conservation Alliance, Missouri Department of Conservation, Environmental Protection Agency, the City of Kansas City and others.

In 2017, Heartland Conservation Alliance received \$500,000 in compensatory groundwater restoration funds to advance the USACE ecosystem restoration plan. The restoration project began in 2019 and implements significant portions of the USACE and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) restoration plans in and around existing water bodies and wetlands from the Boys Grow farm site to the east.



Major Project Accomplishments

- Hired Habitat Architects to conduct habit restoration on 20+ acres of wetland
- Partnership was awarded \$50,000 from National Fish & Wildlife Foundation to host five community days to catalyze awareness and stewardship
- Project partner USGS cost-shared \$100,000 to test water at the Municipal Farm site
- Partnership planted 41 trees
- Community Days had estimated marketing reach of 18,000
- engaged 130 volunteer community members
- The partnership cleared 22 acres of invasive bush honeysuckle

Next Steps

- Adopt conservation easement with assistance from The Conservation Fund;
- Continue site maintenance with Habitat Architects;
- Sustain volunteer stewardship restoration;
- Support Boys Grow agroforestry and conservation projects;
- Connect site to Rock Island Corridor Trail;
- Build workforce opportunities at the site;
- Deepen relationships with surrounding neighborhood; and
- Build relationships with user groups to increase on-site trail use

BLUE VALLEY PARK

History

Blue Valley Park has a long history with its community. Established in 1945, this 238.5 acres sits alongside the Blue River. It has a small lake, historic Santa Fe trails, rolling woods and traditional amenities like Frisbee golf and ball fields added over the years due to efforts by the community. Following the decline of the neighborhood in the 1960's when nearby steel businesses closed and families left, crime, trash and overgrowth moved in. Since



the 1980's, the Blue Valley Neighborhood Association has organized volunteer clean ups, raised funds and brought needs to the attention of the Parks Board. Two years ago, they began to restore an oxbow near the ball fields improving natural riverside beauty of their park. We will build on these efforts with this green infrastructure project and will restore 50 acres of riparian corridor, increasing community access and visibility, reducing flooding, managing stormwater and enhancing habitat.

The Blue Valley Neighborhood is located in Kansas City, Mo, with a population of 7,762 residents who on average are 42 years old and 62% are renters. This is a working class neighborhood that 2010 census data notes is 78% minority (Hispanic 22%, Black 51%, White 32%), 34% not in the labor force and 69% earning less than \$25,000 annually. When comparing this data using the EPA's Environmental Justice Screen we found that our community ranks at a much higher risk than the state's average for reasons mentioned above as well as residents are lower-income (74% vs. 35% citywide) and less than a high school education (23% vs.12% citywide) The community is flanked on the east side by Interstate 435 and a heavy industrial corridor, now abandoned. The community has experienced severe flooding from the Blue River over the years and is located in a combined sewer overflow area.



With support from EPA, the Blue River Urban Waters worked to deepen understanding and relationships with the community of Blue Valley. Surveys, public events and community outreach resulted in developing a restoration plan for Blue Valley Park with \$240,000 in funding support from the National Recreation and Parks Association.

Accomplishments

- Hosted a community open house;
- Hosted community workdays that trained community members to identify and remove invasive species;
- Concluded Healthy Rivers Partnership-supported restoration project with funding from National Fish and Wildlife Foundation removed invasive bush honeysuckle from 20 acres of parkland;
- Created restoration plan for 50 acres of parkland along Blue River with contractor Habitat Architects;
- Created volunteer training program to build and maintain trails in park;
- Worked with Urban Trail Co. to design a trail system; and
- Established Blue Valley Community Advisory Council to lead restoration planning.

Next Steps

- Work with KC Parks to adopt Natural Resource Management plan for park;
- Build more trails;
- Sustain maintenance of restoration areas;

- Increase use of park;
- Host Green Guard Stewardship Training for nearby public schools and families; and
- Work with neighborhood to implement workforce development plans.

Community Engagement

RESTORING VACANT LOTS

History

In 2013, the Blue River Urban Waters team began building upon current work developing a Blue River watershed restoration strategy to study 3,000 vacant lands in the Middle Blue River Watershed with a goal to identify properties to redevelop with green infrastructure or Low-Impact Development to improve watershed health and community vitality. Working with Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) Natural Resource Inventory; Kansas City, Missouri Water Services stormwater studies; and City Planning and Development plans among other criteria. Findings will be shared widely to integrate water quality protection into land use planning and to support Kansas City's community improvement goals.



In 2015, MARC and Heartland Conservation Alliance teamed up with the Urban Neighborhood Initiative to co-lead a Vacant to Vibrant initiative and created a Working with Vacant Lots Field Guide and assisted neighborhoods with revitalizing communities by greening vacant lots. The long-range goal is to protect open space increase access to nature, improve stormwater management and increase neighborhood vitality. Vacant lot restorations demonstrate solutions to issues impacting the health of the Blue River and surrounding community.



Accomplishments

- Published updated Field Guide, hold workshops to publicize;
- Provided technical assistance to four community members who received mini-grants from UNI to use the Field Guide and restore vacant lots;
- With funding support from the Health Forward Foundation, created online mapping tool to analyze best lots for greening projects; and
- Mid-America Regional Council and Wichita State University developed Vacant Lot Business Plan to provide cost analysis of using native plants to manage vacant lots.

Next steps

- Publish Vacant Lot Business Plan (2020);
- Continue to promote and distribute Field Guide (2020); and
- Develop Green Infrastructure Plan (2020)

GREEN GUARD STEWARDSHIP TRAINING

History

Heartland Conservation Alliance's Green Guard Stewardship Program connects community members to nature in their neighborhood and teaches them how to take care of it. In turn, preserving their natural areas helps them preserve their local identity. An appreciation for nature is a social value that can be learned from the stewards we train as they work in their community. As one's sense of place evolves so does the pride they take in their community. In February 2016, Heartland Conservation Alliance launched its first class of stewards partnering with East High School.



The Green Guard Stewardship Program has been in Ivanhoe, Blue Valley, Marlborough and Seven Oaks Neighborhoods. The class convenes once a week for 12 weeks each spring and fall. The program provides a stipend, water bottle and resources each week. Our partners help teach each class, exposing community members to a wide array of expertise and opportunities. The Green Guard Stewardship Program enables Kansas City's urban communities to take ownership of their surroundings while creating environmental literacy in watershed health, plant identification, biodiversity, community engagement, green infrastructure, how to safely interact with wildlife in the city and land use. In addition, it increases community engagement within civic organizations who work to alleviate poverty by building capacity in order to protect natural areas for the enjoyment of all.

Accomplishments

The program graduated 20 in 2018. Through partnership with the Missouri Department of Conservation's Tree Resource Improvement and Maintenance (TRIM) grant program, HCA contracted Molly Gosnell, Midwest GeoInfo, to produce a tree inventory of the East High School forest.

There were 31 students who completed the spring Green Guard Stewardship Program at East High School in May of 2019, Over the course of three months, stewards participated in a total of 12 classes and two workdays in the 13-acre forest patch at East High School, Alex George Lake, Municipal Farm, KC Water, Blue Valley Park, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Discovery Center, and other local sites. Stewards represented East High School, East High School's English Language Learners Program, Northeast High School, Blue Valley neighborhood, Brookside neighborhood, Rockhurst University, and the University of Oregon. Nearly 30 Alliance partners contributed their time to teach and mentor throughout the program.

Next Steps

- Host Green Guard Stewardship at East High School (13 acres); and
- Build Trails at JA Rogers and Trailwoods Schools.

RENEW THE BLUE

History

Over the years, partners laid the groundwork for a strategic communications plan by identifying key audiences and core messages, developing the “Renew the Blue” brand and logo, and sharing information about each organization’s activities. The co-branded messaging campaign rose from the need to coordinate efforts and messages for a healthy watershed. The Blue River Urban Waters Steering Council created and adopted a Strategic Communication Plan in 2016. Heartland Conservation alliance has been leading the implementation of the plan with support of stakeholders on an Outreach & Education Work Group. The Plan envisions a vibrant, resilient Blue River ecosystem that boasts healthy riparian corridors, diverse plant communities, urban forests and prairie grasslands, with abundant habitat for wildlife. The Blue River will offer recreational opportunities that promote healthy activities, including a network of hiking and biking trails; places to boat, float, fish or swim; it will link to a larger regional system of trails and greenways; and access to cultural and activity centers. The river is a centerpiece of revitalized neighborhoods and a community asset that is valued and maintained by residents and visitors alike. It is an important part of our region’s history and our future.

The RENEW THE BLUE Unified Messaging campaign is helping people understand how amazing the river is to our community and ways they can connect to their urban waters. The campaign helps partners and the public understand who is working on and in the river. The campaign unites our efforts into a larger story and increases our success. Partners participating in RENEW THE BLUE co-brand their existing work and share key metrics with each other.

The overall goals of our RENEW THE BLUE initiative are to:

- Restore riparian forests, upland habitats and wetlands in the Blue River Watershed.
- Revitalize brownfields and urban neighborhoods with connections to the Blue River.
- Engage the community to connect people — especially neighbors — to the Blue River.
- Support partners already working to restore the Blue River.



Accomplishments

- Hosted and supported 15 Renew the Blue Events, including updating outreach materials for public tabling to support Renew the Blue maps and other collateral material
- Conducted monthly calls to Renew the Blue partners to collect outcomes and maintain relationship;
- Launched new website: www.JoinRenewtheBlue.org
- Estimated total promotional reach for the 2018 was 56,791
- Estimated total attendance for 2018 events was 3,762 people.
- Distributed Renew the Blue materials for 2018
 - Brochures = 434
 - Maps = 1257
 - Stickers = 535

Next Steps

- Continue restoration at Blue Valley Park,
- Maintain outdoor classroom at East High School;
- Continue working with neighborhood leaders and deepening area connections;
- Organize partners around outdoor classroom development at BVP.

For more information on Heartland Conservation Alliance and information in this workplan contact Jill Erickson at jill@heartlandconservationalliance.org or 816-759-7305, Ext. 1148